

Writing and Religion

Mary Beard

In 304 BCE, or not long before, a man by the name of Cnaeus Flavius displayed in the Forum at Rome, for the first time, the official calendar of religious festivals. Or so several Roman writers assure us. It was a revolutionary act. For up to that point, the calendar of festivals and all kinds of information that went with it (including various legal rules and formulas and details of the days on which one was allowed to bring cases) had been in the hands of a small group of priests: “hidden away in the storeroom of the *pontifices*” as the historian Livy puts it (*From the Foundation of the City* 9.46.5) and making the people as a whole dependent on secret priestly knowledge. The ancient writers disagree about exactly at which stage of his career Flavius did this. Was it while he held the office of *aedile* (a middle-ranking elected magistracy in the city)? Or was it earlier, while he was still a government clerk (*scriba*)? Cicero even debated this problem in 50 BCE, in a letter to his friend Atticus (*To Atticus* 6.1), who had raised the awkward possibility that the calendar had actually been made public more than a century before Flavius’s intervention. But, details apart, this action was clearly seen as a blow against the power of the traditional priestly and governing class at Rome—Flavius himself being (in Livy’s words again) “of humble birth” or, more precisely, the son of an ex-slave.

How accurate this anecdote is, we simply do not know. But, accurate or not, it brings into view some of the most important aspects of the interaction between religion and writing, not just in Rome but throughout the ancient Mediterranean world—and, indeed, more widely. First, the apparent complexity of the written document that Flavius is supposed to have revealed: an established, annual calendar of rituals, linked into a whole series of regulations about the use of different days in the year and other procedures of civil law. This kind of elaborate religious codification, with its fixed and complex rules of proper behavior, is scarcely conceivable without the resource of writing. Second, the contested political dimension. This story presents two alternative models of how written religious knowledge might be deployed: on the one

hand, as the private text of an exclusive, literate priestly group, and so a formidable weapon in the armory of priestly control; on the other, as a potentially public piece of information, and so—as Flavius was to demonstrate by his posting of the calendar in the Forum—a weapon in the democratization of religious power. Third, the controversy between the ancient writers on the precise version of events is itself ultimately a product of writing. For the *history* of religion in the strictest sense, the very idea that religious history could be a subject of study and debate, separate from practice and tradition, largely depends on the “reification of the past” that comes with *written records*. We ourselves, of course, are beneficiaries of those same records; for in the absence of Roman writing, we would now know nothing of Flavius and his calendar, still less be able to explore its significance.

This chapter will reflect on the issues raised by Flavius’s story, among other facets of the interaction of religion and writing in the ancient Mediterranean world. It will attempt to set these in the context of more general, theoretical, and anthropological studies of the role of written texts within cultural systems and the contested interface between traditions of “literacy” and “orality” that, since the invention of writing itself, have characterized every culture, whether ancient or modern. A particular point of reflection will be the idea of the “religion of the book.” How far are ancient Judaism and Christianity, with their apparent reliance on a defining body of doctrinal texts, to be set apart from the other religions discussed in this volume?

The implications of writing

Over the last fifty years or so, the disciplines of both history and anthropology have focused intensely on the cultural history of reading and writing. For ancient historians one obvious question has been: how many people in any given ancient society were literate? It is a question that is, of course, easier to pose than to answer. Even in modern societies, with all their resources of mass survey and testing, literacy rates are notoriously hard to pin down; and they fluctuate according to the definition of literacy deployed (many more people can read than can write, many more can sign their name than can transmit even a simple message in writing). From antiquity, we have no statistical data. Our conclusions must be based on deduction from hints in ancient literature and documents, on comparison with the slightly clearer evidence from more-recent premodern societies, and, frankly, on a good deal of guesswork. For all these uncertainties, however, most scholars would now agree that throughout the ancient Mediterranean adult male literacy—in the sense of the ability to send and understand a simple written message—generally remained below 20 percent. There may have been a few, short-lived exceptions to that rule in particular communities in the ancient world. But even the apparently literate culture of the classical Greek city-states or of early imperial Rome was not founded on the mass ability to read and write. And in many societies the rate of literacy

would have been considerably lower than 20 percent. A recent estimate for ancient Egypt, for example, suggests that at most periods less than 1 percent of the total population was literate. For obvious social, cultural, and political reasons, far fewer women than men could ever read and write.

Some of the consequences of this are clear and hold good for all ancient societies. Crucially for any understanding of ancient religion, the vast majority of people experienced religion orally. This is true, to some extent, even today. At least, no religious system is, or has ever been, mediated entirely in writing; oral communication, performance, and reaffirmation are always significant components of religious practice. Nonetheless in antiquity, unlike in the modern West, most of the population had access to the language of religion (whether doctrine, the word of the divine, exegesis, administration, or dissent) only orally. Modern scrutiny of the written traces of ancient religions (and—
notwithstanding the importance of visual images—the history of religion is heavily dependent on written evidence) must always bear in mind the wider oral context of that writing, the interface between oral and written traditions.

Beyond that, however, the particular ramifications of restricted literacy are varied in different societies, religions, and social groups. The map of ancient illiteracy is much subtler than any raw percentage might suggest. It is linked to different political and social structures: a democratic system of government might prompt a different spread of literacy from a palace bureaucracy; while urban life was everywhere strikingly more literate than was rural life. But it may also be linked to the character of the writing system involved: syllabic or pictographic scripts often entail different patterns of literacy from alphabetic systems. In Egypt, for example, hieroglyphs—known as “the god’s words”—were not only different in function from the simpler, so-called Demotic script (hieroglyphs were used predominantly in official, public inscriptions, very commonly in temples) but competence in hieroglyphic writing was confined to a much-smaller scribal or priestly group. There is no clear division between those with and those without access to the written word that operates across the religions of the Mediterranean world.

But the impact of writing on a religious system does not depend solely on the rates of literacy within any given religious community. Nor is that impact restricted to the literate minority—leaving the illiterate majority in an entirely oral culture unaffected by the strategies and conventions of literacy to which they have no direct access themselves. It is now well recognized that the existence of writing within a society (even if it is a tool that can actively be deployed by only a tiny few) can have wide cultural consequences that affect illiterate and literate alike. Quite simply, writing almost always (and, some would say, necessarily) changes the ways that societies operate and think about themselves—in religion as much as in any other sphere.

Many of the recent studies of this cultural aspect of writing owe their intellectual origins to a famous article by Jack Goody and Ian Watt entitled “The Consequences of Literacy,” first published in 1963. In this theoretical essay, which took archaic and classical Greece as its prime example, Goody and Watt

emphasized the intellectual and cognitive consequences of the spread of alphabetic writing systems. Part of their argument rested on the sheer permanency of writing. For them, entirely oral cultures were marked by the “unconscious operation of memory” and forgetfulness (“social amnesia”): where there is no written record, myths and traditions that no longer seem useful or appropriate are simply forgotten and pass out of the cultural memory. Practices continue in what is thought to be the traditional way (“as our ancestors did it”), but in fact are constantly adjusted—albeit tacitly and unconsciously—to new circumstances and ideas. But once writing is employed as a recording device, later generations will be faced with the written evidence of their earlier customs and thought and will need consciously to align their own behavior to it—whether in the form of rigid conservatism, explicit rejection of tradition, or self-consciously critical “historical” analysis. To take one of Goody and Watt’s key examples, “once the poems of Homer and Hesiod, which contained much of the earlier history, religion and cosmology of the Greeks, had been written down, succeeding generations were faced with old distinctions in sharply exaggerated form: how far was the information about the gods and heroes literally true? How could its patent inconsistencies be explained? And how could the beliefs and attitudes implied be brought into line with those of the present?” (1963).

Similar factors lie behind the development of explicitly skeptical traditions. Every society includes men and women with unorthodox ideas, people who adopt a radically dissenting attitude to generally accepted views on religion, politics, and social order. But in an entirely oral culture, skepticism tends to die with the individual skeptic. Once the skeptic commits his or her views to the permanency of writing, however, the possibility opens of a whole *tradition* of skepticism, an alternative counterculture, parallel to society’s orthodox norms. This is obviously of particular importance in the history of religion and in the development of radical, skeptical inquiry into traditional religious “truths.” Goody and Watt cite the example of the Greek thinker Xenophanes in the 6th century BCE, whose surviving work includes criticism of the then-standard views on the anthropomorphic form of the gods: “If horses were able to draw, they would draw the forms of the gods like horses” (DK 21 B15). Xenophanes, we may add, in confirmation of their point, was still being read and quoted at the end of antiquity, more than a millennium later.

Goody and Watt also stress the influence of writing on the potential complexity of any organization, whether political, social, or religious. As Goody argues at greater length in his later book, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), the ability to transcend oral memory by the apparently simple device of a written list opens up a whole series of intellectual possibilities—from the detailed classification of property (furniture, animals, or agricultural produce can be listed by type, weight, location, and so forth) to the intricate definition of calendrical time, dividing the year according to months and days and the religious obligations appropriate to each occasion (as in the calendar “published” by Cnaeus Flavius). At its most ambitious, Goody and Watt’s scheme follows some earlier theorists in suggesting that the invention of writing drives a cognitive revolution, enabling for the first time certain forms of

what we might call logical thinking—from the simple syllogism (if *a* then *b*, etc.) to other more complicated forms of algebraic logic.

This work has prompted considerable reaction, both favorable and—in some specific respects—dissenting. Goody himself, in response to those who objected that the phrase *consequences of literacy* appeared to suggest a too-rigid schema (in which literacy was always and necessarily followed by various social and intellectual developments) now prefers the phrase “the implications of literacy.” It also remains very much an open question what level of literacy in a society, and what form of literacy, would entail the implications (or consequences) proposed. In their first article, Goody and Watt envisaged “widespread” and “alphabetic” literacy, stressing the democratic and revolutionary intellectual power of the Greek system of writing as against the scribal, narrowly restricted literacy of the syllabic or pictographic systems of ancient Babylonia or Egypt. But in his later work on lists, Goody drew as much on ancient Near Eastern material as on Greco-Roman examples (including lists and hierarchical rankings of deities from Babylonia and Egypt). In general, although the range and spread of writing differed significantly in different ancient Mediterranean societies, we can trace at least some of Goody and Watt’s implications in all the (partially) literate communities covered by this volume.

Certainly, the impact of writing on ancient Mediterranean religion is evident far beyond the culture of ancient Greece, on which Goody and Watt principally drew. We have already noted the existence of a Roman calendar of festivals, whose complex and elaborately codified information would have been unthinkable without the resource of writing: in the most detailed examples of these calendars, the written data laid out include the legal and religious status of each day of the year, the divisions into months (and the main divisions within months), the traditional roster of public holidays and more recent additions to this set of festivals, plus some information on the festival concerned (the principal deity attached, the place of celebration, or the reason for its foundation). Other aspects of religion also illuminate (and are illuminated by) the Goody-Watt hypothesis. The logic of Mesopotamian divination, for example, has been linked to the particular conventions of pictographic script in which it was recorded, while in Roman cult, one of the most striking features was the preservation of archaic and apparently obsolete religious lore. By the 1st century CE, the ancient hymn sung by the Salii at their regular ritual “dance” through the streets of Rome was incomprehensible—it is reported by one Roman writer—even to the priests themselves. Likewise the hymn chanted by the Arval Brethren and recorded on one of the inscriptions documenting this priesthood’s ritual activity in their sacred grove a few miles outside the city of Rome appears now (as it must have appeared to most Romans for most of their history) to be bafflingly archaic mumbo jumbo; it makes (and made) sense, if at all, only to a few specialists in the earliest form of Latin. The preservation of these ancient religious texts would have been impossible without written documents; and indeed the inscriptions from the Arval grove explicitly refer to written copies of the hymn used by the priests in their chanting.

But Goody and Watt’s implications go further than that (as Gordon has ar-

gued in his 1990 study of Roman religion in the light of Goody and Watt's work). First, the incomprehensibility of these texts itself stimulated further writing, in learned commentaries that (often equally obscurely) attempted to interpret and explain their meaning. A commentary on the Salian hymn existed already in the 1st century BCE, and one of the most distinctive parts of Roman religious discourse from that time on was a whole series of specialized treatises that offered exegesis on arcane aspects of cult and cult history (e.g., *On Religious Formulas* or *On the Derivation of the Names of the Gods*). Writing, in other words, stimulated more writing. Second are the implications for religious power and control that follow from the obscurantism enshrined in this writing. For unintelligibility (which, in Gellner's words, "leaves the disciple with a secret guilt of not understanding") could be an important defense of priestly or other expert religious power. The public display of written mumbo jumbo, and the importance vested in it as hallowed tradition, was almost bound to enhance the authority of those who could claim to understand, while disadvantaging those who could not and were reliant on the interpretative skills of others. If the story of Flavius offered a popular, democratic parable of writing, other written forms offer the directly opposite message.

Influential and instructive as they are, Goody and Watt's theories can, however, be misleading if applied too rigidly, particularly in the sphere of religion. The dangers are most clearly seen in the fundamental issue of the *function* of writing. For Goody and Watt, writing is an essentially utilitarian activity. It is there to be read and to be acted on as appropriate. So, for instance, written records of procedures establish precedent and encourage conservative practice precisely because they are consulted and their example followed. But a significant part of religious writing is not utilitarian in this way. With its functions classified under the admittedly rather vague rubric of "symbolic," it may act to display, to memorialize, to reify and make permanent a variety of legitimate and illegitimate religious claims and actions—not necessarily to be read and used, at least not within the community of living mortals. The most extreme case of this is the use of writing within the varied group of religious practices we now know as magic. Spells and curses, written on lead or papyrus and deposited in tombs or wells, may well have been thought to preserve the magician's oral utterance and to take it as close as possible to the dead or chthonic powers who would mediate or bring about the desired result. More than that, the transgressive forms of writing commonly adopted in curses (e.g., words written back to front, varieties of nonsense script) served to reify the transgressions implicit in the curse itself. One Athenian spell, from the 4th century BCE, makes this link explicit. It is written backward, from right to left, and reads: "In the same way that this is cold and 'out of true,' let the words of Krates be cold and 'out of true' in the same way, his as well as those of the accusers and lawyers who accompany him" (Wünsch 1897: appendix no. 67). But even outside the particular area of "magical" practices, ancient religious writing was often not principally intended for a reader, and even some of the most exten-

sive and detailed religious records were not systematically consulted as a guide to precedent. The records of ritual procedures made by the Arval Brethren and inscribed on stone in their sacred grove did not consistently dictate the future conduct of ritual—as the numerous changes in procedure that the texts document make clear. The inscription memorialized the rituals carried out, rather than providing a reference guide for how to act in the future. Likewise the vast majority of the many thousands of Roman inscriptions detailing vows and the performance of sacrifices can hardly have been widely consulted—or intended to be so; instead they instantiated and made permanent the ritual act itself. Writing, in other words, could be as much an integral part of religious symbolism as an external record of it.

Religions of the book?

It is conventional to draw a sharp distinction in terms of the role of writing between Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and the rest of the religions covered by this volume on the other. In Judaism and Christianity, doctrine and the word of God was defined in writing; they were—and still are—“religions of the book.” This was not the case anywhere else, from Babylonia to Roman Italy; and in these other religions, so it follows, writing played a less important (or, at least, a less structurally central) part. How useful a distinction is this? Precisely how sharp should we make it?

There is no doubt at all that writing (and reading) had a particularly loaded role to play in the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition. It was not simply a question of the textual basis of religious doctrine. Writing was invested with even greater power and authority than that. So, for example, the Book of Exodus makes the radical claim that the tablets given to Moses on Sinai carried texts that were not merely the word of God in the sense of being divinely *inspired*, they were actually divinely *written*: “And he gave to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God . . . And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables” (Exod. 31.18; 32.16). And it is well known that Jews accorded considerable veneration to the physical form of their sacred texts, as if (in the words of Goodman) “religious power was enshrined within the physical object on which the divine teachings were inscribed.” Torah scrolls were written according to strict rules, in carefully prescribed lettering, in ink and on the best parchment. Josephus—the Jewish priest and historian who eventually sided with the Romans in the Jewish revolt that ended in 70 CE—was well placed to observe that the destruction of a Jewish text by a Roman soldier ended in a riot (*Jewish War* 2.229–31) and that Vespasian and Titus had a scroll of the Torah carried in their triumphal procession through Rome in 71 (7.150); the scroll itself, among the other booty on show, was a powerful symbol of Roman victory over the Jews. Not surprisingly perhaps, these texts sometimes filled the sym-

bolic role of writing that we have already noted. As Goodman and others have pointed out, the miniature texts used in phylacteries (pouches for Torah texts, bound onto the arms or forehead) “were encased in leather in such a way that they usually could not be read at all.”

In early Christianity, too, the importance of writing went well beyond the existence of scripture (a word that is directly derived from the Latin for “writing”: *scriptura*). The divergences between different groups of early Christians (divergences sometimes cast as the struggle of “orthodoxy” against the “heretics”) were often cast in terms of the competing authority of different written texts, as well as different interpretation of the canonical Gospels. One 7th-century Christian theologian, for example, could refer to the “foul, loathsome, and unclean writings of the accursed Manicheans, gnostics, and the rest of the heretics” (John of Damascus, *Orations* 2.10). Written texts were also crucial in such cohesion as the early church could obtain. The scattered communities of early Christians depended, very largely, on written communication for any sense of group identity; the letters of Paul from the 50s and 60s CE are only the start of a tradition of epistolary exchange that aimed to reinforce and define the Christian community. And, in general, the symbolism of writing pervaded Christian discourse and visual representation. Jesus, for example, appears in early Christian sculpture displaying a book roll as his major attribute. One vivid image of heavenly power comes in the form of the “book of life,” into which angels transcribe the names of good Christians for ultimate reward, while the names of sinners are listed with equal rigor elsewhere. Lane-Fox has aptly referred to these recording angels as “a literate police force, active above early Christian saints and sinners.” Another image, in both Christianity and Judaism, pictures the prophet as a man who has literally consumed the written word of God. In John’s visionary account in the Book of Revelation, “I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was as sweet as honey in my mouth . . . And I was told, ‘You must again prophesy’ (Rev. 10.10–11); or as God said to Ezekiel, “Eat this scroll, and go, speak” (Ezek. 3.1).

Yet it is not quite so simple as it might seem. For a start, on the basis of what we can infer about levels of literacy throughout antiquity, most people, even in these apparently “textual” religious communities, must have had their texts mediated orally. In fact, one conservative—though not implausible—recent estimate puts the total number of Christians who were fluently literate at the end of the 1st century CE as no more than fifty at any one moment. But, even more significant than any low rate of literacy, both Judaism and Christianity embraced alternative traditions that appear to have vested as much authority in oral as in written discourse. In Judaism, for example, there was a powerful view that Moses was given the oral law, as well as written texts, on Mount Sinai; and the Mishnah, although it was authoritatively codified in writing around 200 CE, parades in form and style its oral origins as the sayings of rabbis. In Christianity, by contrast, the claims of oral authority were upheld by the simple fact that Jesus himself wrote nothing. And, for all the textual obsessions of the early church, there was an influential strand of Christian thought

that positively glorified illiterate simplicity, while stressing that the Christian faithful did not need a learned (which often, in effect, meant a “pagan”) education. Some early Christian saints were praised precisely because they were *sine litteris* (illiterate), as were Jesus’s own disciples. John and Peter, for example, are dubbed “illiterate” (*aggrammatoi*) in the Acts of the Apostles (4.13). Predictably, perhaps, “pagan” intellectual critics of Christianity seem to have found such “holy ignorance” a further ground for mistrust of the new religion.

The picture becomes even more complicated if we start to compare the role of writing in the Judeo-Christian tradition with other religions covered in this volume. It is certainly the case that no other ancient belief system was so reliant on a group of doctrinal written texts. And it is partly for this reason—because we do not find writing where, as heirs of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we *expect* to find it—that scholars have tended to suggest that the practice of religious writing was less significant in ancient religions outside Judaism and Christianity. In fact, although there are clear differences, they are not so stark as they might appear at first sight. We have already noted the Egyptian term for hieroglyphs as “the god’s words” and observed the central role of writing in those religious practices that go by the name of magic. The world of Greco-Roman “paganism” offers an even wider range of the uses of writing in cult and belief. Although the official state cults of Rome and the Greek cities were not generally founded on divinely inspired or divinely written texts, in some noncivic cults—such as those of Orpheus and the Egyptian Hermes—the word of the god, as inscribed in sacred texts, did hold a central place. At Rome itself, the major state collection of oracular texts, the Sibylline Oracles, owed its origin and its authority to the figure of the Sibyl of Cumae—a divinely inspired prophetess. The Sibylline Oracles were regularly consulted at times of danger and trouble for the city, and they were, in a sense, the word of god; they were preserved and recopied (even if conveniently amended in the process) with the full panoply of religious care. Other ancient oracles worked entirely through writing, without the involvement of even an original oral prophecy: the oracle at Praeneste (near Rome), for example, was based on the consultation of written wooden tablets, which had been discovered miraculously—already inscribed—inside a nearby rock. Although modern scholarship has tended to privilege the oral consultation of an oracle (as at the famous oracle of Apollo at Delphi), Greco-Roman gods regularly communicated in writing.

But writing pervaded the religious world of Rome in other senses. The priestly colleges were associated with so-called priestly books. Although these do not survive beyond the occasional fragmentary quotation and their exact content is still disputed, it seems very likely that they recorded details of religious formulas and procedure (or, in the case of the document that Flavius published, calendrical and legal information). More striking still, however, is the role of writing in dedications and vows in temples and sanctuaries. When Pliny the Younger visited the sanctuary of Clitumnus near modern Spoleto in the early 2nd century CE, he found a site full of the written word: “Everything there will delight you,” he wrote to a friend, “and you can also find something

to read. You can study the numerous inscriptions in honor of the spring [*fons*] and of the god, which many hands have written on every pillar and wall" (*Letters* 8.8.7). Even today, when almost everything inscribed on perishable material has disappeared, many Greco-Roman sanctuaries still preserve the written traces of their worshipers' activities and expressions of piety or gratitude. Although Pliny suggests that the elite visitor might find plenty to read (and, he goes on, to laugh at) in such a sanctuary, the reading visitor can hardly have been uppermost in the mind of most of those commissioning these inscriptions. Much more likely, the intention of the writing was to memorialize, or give permanence to, the ritual act commemorated. More generally, in a religion in which there were no clear articles of faith, no formal badge of belonging or ceremony of initiation, memorializing religious action in an inscription was a way of "writing oneself in" to "membership" of the religious community. This sense of "writing as belonging" took a notable twist in the conflicts between Christianity and traditional civic cults in the Roman Empire during the 3rd century CE. The emperor Decius ordered that everyone should sacrifice to the gods to prove that they were not Christian. But not just that. Once they had sacrificed in the presence of two official witnesses, they could be issued with a written certificate to authenticate their action—and, no doubt, to produce if challenged again. A few of these certificates still survive from Roman Egypt (e.g., Mitteis and Wilcken 1912: no. 124).

What underlies these different manifestations of the written word in ancient religions is not a simple clash between "religions of the book" and the rest. It is rather a series of questions about the mediation of divine power that all religions must accommodate, if not answer. What forms of communication—written or oral—carry most authority? How do you weigh the immediacy of orality against the permanency of writing? How does religious speech relate to religious text? Different religions offer different answers to these questions—and different answers at different periods and in different circumstances. In studying ancient religious systems, it is much more helpful to concentrate on that constant play-off between oral and written traditions, in all its different varieties and with all its different emphases—rather than to use the role of writing as a fixed standard against which to classify or hierarchize the different religions. This sense of religious dialectic is brilliantly captured in a Jewish story from the 6th-century CE Babylonian Talmud (tractate *Bava Metzi'a* 59a–b). In a dispute between a group of rabbis set in the 2nd century, different forms of authority were claimed for their different interpretations. One, Rabbi Eliezer, after performing a variety of miracles to support his own position, finally—in the face of continuing disagreement from his colleagues—called on heaven itself to prove his point. A supporting divine voice indeed came: "The law accords with what he says." But even this was not enough. One rabbi claimed that the voice did not really come from heaven; another claimed that, even if divine, the voice did not carry the day, for the written law must hold: "Since the Torah has already been given from Mount Sinai, we do not pay attention to heavenly voices, for You have written already at Mount Sinai"; and

he went on to advise God to vote with the majority. And God's reaction to this dispute? "He laughed and said, 'My children have defeated me.'"

The religion of writing

So far I have discussed the role of writing in ancient culture and religion as if it were a topic of interest to modern anthropologists and historians of religion; and I have largely referred to writing as if it were a practice that reacted with, but was essentially separate from, religion. That is, of course, part of the story; but only a part. Writing could also be very much an integral part of religion and ritual, not simply an external influence on it. I have already mentioned briefly the symbolic role of writing within various cult practices, including magic. This should prompt us to see writing itself, potentially at least, as a ritual activity. This was certainly the case in the Arval Grove, where the inscriptions themselves document some of the rituals associated with their inscribing (iron was a prohibited substance in the grove, so the introduction of the iron tools had to be accompanied by expiatory sacrifices). In Greece the formal inscription and preservation of oaths and treaties was often similarly ritualized. In Plato's *Critias*, written in the 4th century BCE, he envisages a sacrifice in the mythical Atlantis, where the blood of a sacrificial animal is made to wash over, literally, the texts of preserved laws (119c–20c). And, as Steiner has observed (1994), the 5th-century BCE historian Herodotus projects a similar concern with ritual inscription onto illiterate barbarians. If barbarians do not use alphabetic writing, at least they "inscribe" their oaths as scars on the body of the oath taker (3.8; 4.70).

No less important is the incorporation of writing into ancient cultural commentary and myth. Plato, for example, in his dialogue *Phaedrus* has the character of Socrates argue that the invention of writing was culturally deleterious, among other reasons because it weakened the human memory (why bother to remember when you can refer to a written text?) and because it was indiscriminate in those it addressed (unlike an oral philosopher, who could choose his audience). And many ancient cultures attributed the origin of writing to divine (or heroic) invention. Egyptian hieroglyphs were said to be the brainchild of the god Thoth. Greek myths ascribed writing variously to (among others) the god Hermes, the mythical Palamedes, or the semidivine Prometheus, who brought writing to mortals as part of his civilizing mission, which also included the gift of fire. Others, however, would have backed the claims of Orpheus, legendary poet, musician, and mystic. He originated, it was said, from Thrace (in the far north of Greece), and different mythical accounts accorded him a quite different role in the history of writing: one tradition makes him its inventor; another claims that, as the Thracians were well known to be illiterate, he could not possibly be writing's ancestor. But more influential still was the idea that after his death his decapitated head continued to sing, and the words were either directly and miraculously transcribed on tablets or else copied down by

faithful secretaries. “Orphic texts” (versions of which circulated widely in Greece) were thought to hold healing properties and to offer, to those who read them, the hope of life after death.

The myth of the talking head of Orpheus and the miraculous properties of Orphic texts might seem a world away from the story of Cnaeus Flavius and his practical assault on the priestly monopoly of knowledge in early Rome. But that indeed must be the range spanned by any study of religion and writing in the ancient world: from mundane record keeping to the “words of god”; from academic exegesis to magical mumbo jumbo; from writing in blood to writing in stone.

Bibliography

- Baines, J. “Literacy in Ancient Egyptian Society.” *Man* 18 (1983): 572–99.
- Beard, M. “Writing and Religion: Ancient Literacy and the Function of the Written Word in Roman Religion.” In *Literacy in the Roman World*, ed. M. Beard et al. *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplement* 3. Ann Arbor, 1991.
- . “Writing and Ritual: A Study of Diversity and Expansion in the Arval Acta.” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 53 (1981): 114–62.
- Bottéro, J., C. Herrenschildt, and J.-P. Vernant. *Ancestor of the West: Writing, Reasoning, and Religion in Mesopotamia, Elam, and Greece*. Chicago, 2000.
- Bowman, A. K., and G. Woolf, eds. *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*. Cambridge, 1994 (see esp. essays by M. D. Goodman and R. Lane Fox).
- Goody, J. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge, 1977.
- Goody, J., and I. Watt. “The Consequences of Literacy.” In *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 304–45; reprinted in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. J. Goody. Cambridge, 1968.
- Gordon, R. L. “From Republic to Principate: Priesthood, Religion, and Ideology.” In *Pagan Priests*, ed. M. Beard and J. North. London, 1990.
- Harris, W. V. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, Mass., 1989.
- Hopkins, K. *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Roman Empire*. London, 1999.
- Mitteis, L., and U. Wilcken. *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyruskunde*, vol. 1.2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1912.
- Sawyer, J. F. A. *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts: Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. London, 1999.
- Steiner, D. Tarn. *The Tyrant’s Writ: Myths and Images of Writing in Ancient Greece*. Princeton, 1994.
- Wünsch, R. “Appendix continens defixionum tabellas in Attica regione repertas.” In *Inscriptiones Graecae*, vol. II/III, *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum*. Berlin: Reimer, 1897.